

THE TWISTED INN

By Hugh Walpole

MR. BANNISTER chose his carriage with some care. He was always careful in the train because if you had work to do it was obviously necessary to have the place to yourself — when people were talking nothing could be done.

It was a dark, windy day in late November. The platform at King's Cross was nearly deserted, and it was all very cold and gloomy. The book-stall stared vacantly across the empty lines and its books and papers fluttered discontentedly as though they protested indignantly against their unhappy neglect—a porter pushed a load of luggage vacantly down the platform and ran into Mr. Bannister; he apologized still vacantly and passed on, dreaming.

Mr. Bannister chose his carriage—a dirty, unappetizing third class furnished with six highly colored representations of "The Spa Langton," "The Beach," "Hitcheton-on-Sea," "The Station Hotel, Tramont," "The High Street, Wotton"—illustrations that were neither truthful nor entrancing.

Mr. Bannister was thin and wore glasses; he had high cheekbones and sandy hair—his eyes were pale gray, watery and red at the edges; his great-coat was threadbare and shiny, his collar was a little frayed and his trousers had never been intended to turn up. Mr. Bannister was a journalist.

Times were hard just then, and, to be strictly truthful, his meals had, of late, been desperately uncertain. On Monday there had been breakfast, on Tuesday lunch, on Wednesday an excellent supper, owing to the happy discovery of a new friend; but to-day there had, as yet, been nothing—he sat in the corner

of his carriage and thought of sausages.

During a year and a half he had worked on the *Daily Post* and pay had been, on the whole, regular. He was a bachelor and claims on his purse were few, so things had gone well with him.

But the *Daily Post* had found the world a cold and unfeeling place and had passed silently away, leaving very few to regret its departure. Mr. Bannister missed it very sincerely, and he discovered how hard life could be. Everything that he handled seemed to be a lost cause, and one paper after another faded away at his eager touch—he depended, eventually, for his living, on the crimes and misfortunes of his fellow men—the world seemed to his tired brain a procession of thieves and murderers with the divorce courts for a background.

To-day he was hurrying down to a little village in a remote part of Wiltshire to investigate a crime of the night before. It was an affair of the usual kind—a woman had been murdered and there were suspicions of a lover. Mr. Bannister went to it as he would to his bath or morning cigarette—to his heated brain murder was the game that everybody played; and he must be back again by the evening to report on a religious revival meeting in Clapham. The clouds were lifting—it was long since he had had two jobs in one day, and the *Telegraph* had given him both of them. The *Telegraph* was an excellent paper.

They had told him that he must be prepared, if necessary, to sleep there during the night—it would be annoying if that were to happen—he would miss the revival. He determined, therefore,

to be as speedy as possible, and he would, he hoped, be able to catch the four-thirty train back to town.

It was dark and stormy and the wind whistled outside the carriage—the scudding clouds seemed to catch the top of the trees and drag them in their own hurrying direction—but the riots clung to the gray earth and the furious heavens tossed the trees back again to their original abiding-place.

Mr. Bannister's coat was thin and he shivered in his corner—it was too dark to see, and the train shook so that it was impossible to write; he flung his notebook down and stared moodily out of the window. He was very hungry and was inclined to regard the world as an evil place; his mind flew back to his younger days when his ambition had challenged heaven and his poverty had seemed certain proof of genius. He had breakfasted on Swinburne, lunched on Pater, and dined on Meredith—now his library had been sold to pay his debts and his debts were still unpaid; he was very hungry.

At a small wayside station there came an old woman—a very massive old woman with a bright print skirt of blue and an immense bosom; she had also a large basket, a bundle of sticks and a little boy. The basket and the sticks she placed carefully at her side; the boy she flung behind her—he fell into the corner and crouched there, against the cushions, softly sobbing.

From her treatment of the boy Mr. Bannister concluded that she was cruel, and he hated her cruelty—so he looked at her sternly and frowned. She sat staring straight in front of her, her hands planted firmly on her knees—she was an enormous woman.

It was growing very dark and horribly cold—it was curiously dark for that time of day, Mr. Bannister thought—moreover, the pangs of hunger came crowding upon him, and, to forsake their company, he plunged into conversation.

"It is strangely dark for the hour," he said, and he coughed nervously. But the woman made no reply; only the lit-

tle boy ceased his sobbing and sat up in his corner to stare amazedly at Mr. Bannister.

"It is a dreary day," he said with a little sigh—but perhaps the wind and the noise of the train had drowned his words, for she gave no answer and sat there without movement.

She was rude as well as cruel, he thought, and he leaned back in his corner and desolately thought of murders and religious meetings and the profitable emotions of highly strung people.

He sat thus for a very considerable time. The train rushed furiously forward, and the landscape grew darker and darker. "There must be a terrible storm coming," thought Mr. Bannister—he watched the ebony blackness of the sky, the dark wavering outlines of fantastic trees, the sudden whites and grays of spaces of cloud and the clear shining of sudden pools.

Within the carriage there was silence, and obscurity gathered in the corners and hid the colored views mercifully in its arms; the outline of the enormous woman was black against the window and the curve of her great basket stood out hooplike in front of her.

Every now and again the train stopped, but no one ever seemed to get in or out, and the desolate little stations with their pathetically neat gardens stared at the train forlornly as though they would have liked to stay and talk for a little time.

Mr. Bannister felt quite sorry for the little gardens—he was arriving at that state of worldwide sympathy consequent on an empty stomach. He was growing vaguely uneasy—he should surely have arrived at his destination some time before. He was afraid lest he should have passed his station, and so he spoke again to the woman.

"Can you tell me," he said politely, "whether we have passed Little Dutton? I am afraid that I must have missed it."

But she did not answer him, and her silence frightened him so that he dared not speak to her again. The consequences of missing his stations would

be very serious indeed at such a crisis in his affairs. There were plenty of other persons ready to take his place and the *Telegraph* could scarcely afford to pay men who missed their trains.

He could not understand the darkness. He had left King's Cross in the morning and, slow though the train had been, it could not be more than lunch-time now. But the carriage was most horribly dark, and only vaguely from beyond the window he caught distant outlines of trees and somber houses.

Then suddenly he saw a star. There could be no mistake. Vividly, brilliantly, it sparkled at him through the carriage windows. A star! Then the darkness was no pretense, no sudden and furious storm as he had supposed. It was night.

But it couldn't be. He was to have arrived at Little Dutton before one, and now it was dark. Then there came to him the horrible certainty that he had slept—there could be no other possible explanation. He must have slept for hours, and Little Dutton must have been left, far, far behind. The horrible discovery left him breathless. He would have to pay for all those miles that he had traveled, and he had nothing to give for them. He had ten shillings; it had been in his eyes a treasure trove on which he would have many meals in the future, and now it must go to pay for a fruitless journey, and even then it would not be enough. He began to speak excitedly to the woman.

"I have slept—I must have been sleeping for hours. Look, there's a star—and I only left King's Cross an hour ago and it was morning. I must have passed Little Dutton hours ago. It is really dreadfully unfortunate—I can't think how it happened. I've never done anything like that before. But where are we going to now? Shall I be able to get out somewhere and change and be back in Little Dutton to-night? It's really most dreadfully important—I haven't the least idea—"

And then suddenly the train stopped. Through the carriage window a station lamp gleamed mistily. The large wom-

an collected hurriedly her basket, her sticks and her little boy and vanished through the door. Mr. Bannister hurriedly followed her.

He leaned out over the platform. It was a tiny wayside station with two lamps and a wild porter with a long beard. He cried discordantly: "All change! All change!" and rushed furiously up and down and looked into every carriage.

"All change!" he cried at Mr. Bannister and hurried on.

So Mr. Bannister got out and faced the situation. His watch, he found, had stopped; it was bitterly cold and the wind drove furiously down the platform. Above his head the stars and a round-faced jesting moon watched him coldly and without feeling.

He grasped the porter by the arm and tried to explain the situation. "I want to get back to Little Dutton to-night—I must get back—it's very important."

"Little Dutton!" The porter looked at him and laughed in the depths of his beard. "Never heard of it. But you can't, anyhow. You can't get anywhere to-night. Six in the morning—"

"There are no trains!" Mr. Bannister stared at him miserably. "Oh, but that is most unfortunate. Then I must sleep here!" He thought dimly of his ten shillings and all the noble plans that had been nipped in the bud. "There is an inn?"

"Oh, yes," said the porter, and again he laughed. "Yes, there is an inn," and he passed off down the platform.

Mr. Bannister pulled his poor cloak more tightly about him and searched for a road. It was visible enough, stretching whitely for a time in front of him and then of a sudden fearfully black where the trees closed darkly in on it. Down this went Mr. Bannister and cursed himself for a fool. By an unnecessary and ill-judged sleep he had, perhaps, missed the turning point of his career, and how he was to get back in the morning he had no idea. It occurred to him as strange that the porter had never asked him for his ticket—

it was indeed a most fortunate chance and, at the thought of it, his spirits went up a great many degrees and he felt a little warmer.

He disliked the blackness of the road and fancied that he was followed. For a moment he stopped and listened to make sure, and it seemed to him that the footsteps also stopped. Then suddenly there flashed across the road in the moonlight a rabbit. His heart beat furiously and he almost screamed. Then the silence and the perplexing moonlight were too much for him, and he took to his heels and ran, panting, down the dark road.

The wind whistled as he ran—it caught his coat and wrapped it, confused, round his legs—it slapped him on the face and brought water to his eyes.

Then, at a turn of the road, he came upon the inn. It stood out very plainly in the moonlight, and he wondered whether it was the brilliant white spaces and the dark caverns of shadow that gave it its strange appearance. For that it was strange there could be no question. It stood there on the edge of a wide and moonlit moor. There seemed to be no other houses near it. It was a thing of gables and overhanging eaves and large diamond-paned windows—it was strangely crooked in shape, and, looked at from the road, seemed to lean curiously to one side. There were lights in the lower windows and the door stood ajar. He passed through it into the dim, uneven hall.

It was dark and musty, with a close, unpleasant feeling of closed windows—on his right the door was open and he turned into a small room, dusty, with the desolate air of a place long forsaken by human beings. Prim chairs of a faded pink chintz and hard little wooden legs, a round and shiny table, bare save for a little green worsted mat in the middle, and a stiff horsehair sofa were the only furniture of the room. On the walls there was nothing to hide the faded green of the wallpaper with the single exception of a large photo-

graph hanging by the door. Onto this the quivering light of a cracked lamp shining from the window sill flung an uncertain light. Mr. Bannister started at it with horror. It was the photograph of the large-bosomed woman in the train. She glared down at him as she had stared before into space—cold, menacing, horrible.

Then he found at his side a little man whom he knew to be the innkeeper—a man round as a ball, with a chubby face and bright brown buttons on his waist-coat.

"I should like a bed," explained Mr. Bannister. "I have most unfortunately missed my train, and I cannot leave until five to-morrow morning. What are your charges?"

"The room will be three shillings—breakfast extra," said the little landlord—he had a voice like a chaffinch.

"And I will have some bread and cheese and beer," said Mr. Bannister. "Could you tell me the time?"

The landlord looked at him—his eyes dilated, his cheeks grew white and his hand shook. Then he leaned forward as though he would whisper in Mr. Bannister's ear; then, as suddenly, he stepped back again, and vanished through the door out into the passage.

Mr. Bannister chose one of the hard pink chintz chairs and waited for the bread and cheese. The room was a room of a thousand ghosts, and the lamp on the table created a shifting curtain of shadow that crept from corner to corner and stole, like the fingers of a gigantic hand, over the dark green wall. Through the little diamond-paned window glimmered the white expanse of the moor under the moon—a magic lake of frosted silver.

He felt very sleepy and hungry. He had no thought now of the expenses of to-morrow and of the letting slip of so great an opportunity. His one wish was for food and a splendid bed into which he might sink down, down, down, with the sheets billowing great waves about him, and so sail on a sea of dreams to a land where journalists were

kings and hunger was for those who deserved it.

The eyes of the photograph followed him round the room and he moved from one hard little chair to another in a hopeless attempt to avoid their gaze, but he gave it up and slipped back into his corner and closed his eyes. Soon his head was nodding and he thought that he slept—but it was a very confused sleep, for people came creeping into the room and out again, and he thought that they were bringing his bread and cheese, but they only looked at him and then crept away, silent as they had come.

Then at last he awoke with a start, for someone was in the room—he sat up in his chair and rubbed his eyes; at the table were seated two men, bending over the lamp, their heads nodding as they talked and flinging giant shadows on the wall behind them.

They wore curious huge black hats that fell, villainously, with most sinister effect, over one ear; they wore, moreover, black cloaks that hung in somber folds behind them over the backs of the pink chintz chairs—he could not see their faces. At their side were large glasses filled with ale, and they glittered in the light of the lamp. Then Mr. Bannister, sitting silently in his dark corner, overheard their conversation.

"They are all asleep. There is no one here."

"No—the man is alone—we are the only travelers."

"The box is under the bed. You know your directions. I will be waiting for you at the bottom of the passage—"

"One blow will be sufficient. When I strike I strike hard."

These muttered sentences struck terror into Mr. Bannister's heart, his hands gripped the sides of his chair and his legs shook so that they knocked against each other.

Against whom could their plot be intended? Supposing it should be meant for himself? At the thought he nearly screamed aloud. But it could not be

for him. They did not know that he was there; he was a traveler and there was no box beneath his bed—at any rate no box of which he had any knowledge. The woman looked down at him from the wall and he shuddered. *She* was in it, you might be sure.

The men were silent, but their great hats still nodded against the wall. He had seen a play once at the Kensington and the villain had worn a hat like that. He had been a horrible man, that villain, and Mr. Bannister had hissed from the upper circle. Then it came to him in a flash that it must be the landlord of whom they had been speaking; he had wanted to speak to him before and he had been horribly afraid—it was the little rosy-cheeked landlord with a voice like a canary whom these men were plotting to murder.

The men were no longer silent, for one of them was snoring—his head had sunk down onto the table and his arms sprawled in front of him; the other also was asleep—only his head was flung back and his hands were clenched—and, even now, his face was hidden under the shadow of his hat.

Mr. Bannister thought it strange that such villains should fall asleep so speedily, but now was the moment for escape. He would go and warn the landlord. He rose, trembling, from his chair and crept softly round the table, his eyes fixed on the sleepers.

One of them moved, and Mr. Bannister stood transfixed with terror, his hands clasping the edge of the table, his breath coming in short gasps, his eyes round as saucers—but nothing followed. They were, both of them, sound asleep, and he turned to the door.

The handle creaked in his grasp, and he thought that this must certainly waken them, but there was still no movement, and he escaped.

The passage was as dark as the grave. There was, he thought, no time to be lost, and he groped his way by the wall. The passage was heavy with the smell of decaying things. Mr. Bannister thought of cabbage and a damp church in winter-time.

He knew that he must hasten, but progress was very slow and the passage seemed to have no end. He had a confused feeling that people were on all sides of him, and he imagined white faces in the dark and the soft steps of hidden pursuers. He could not understand why the passage was so long. The inn had not seemed a very large place—but this was interminable. The air grew thicker and thicker around him and he wondered whether he was descending into the heart of the earth. The thought of a living grave terrified him, and he leaned against the damp wall, his poor coat flapping against his trembling knees, and his hands stretched in front of his face as though to guard it from unseen horrors into which he might at any moment plunge.

Then, with a sigh of relief, he saw light ahead, and, to his surprise, found himself back in the little entrance hall through which he had passed on his first arrival. But had he? As he glanced around him it seemed strangely familiar, and yet he had thought that he had come straight from the door into the narrow passage. On his right he saw an ancient and trembling staircase that vanished into a higher floor. It was perhaps up this that the landlord had gone—at any rate, he must warn him, and then he would escape out of this place as soon as might be.

The stairs led him on to a dim passage and he could not see the end of it, but opposite to him there was a door. There might be other doors to right and left, but he could not face the darkness that stretched on either side, and so he turned the handle and entered the room.

It was an enormous bedroom and through the open window streamed the light of the moon. There was very little furniture in the room. A large oak cupboard stood to the right of the window, and in the center there was an enormous bed—an ancient four-poster with faded red curtains and little wooden lions carved on the posts.

From one of these posts a body was hanging. At the sight of it his throat

became horribly dry; his eyes burnt in his head like fire; suddenly frozen into stone, he stood there, choking with horror. It was the body of a little man, and it hung with its limbs swaying a little from side to side. The head lolled forward and was strangely gray in the light of the moon. It was the little landlord with a voice like a chaffinch. Mr. Bannister could see his brown buttons shining with the swaying of the body.

"I am too late. Oh, dear, I am too late," he cried, and then he turned to flee. But, as he turned with the handle of the door in his grasp, he heard steps on the stair. Someone was coming stealthily with muffled feet. "Stockings!" thought Mr. Bannister. He turned back into the room. He knew that the steps would not pass the door. He looked at the moon and then he looked at the body swaying in front of him and then he looked at the oak cupboard. "They will find me here," he thought; "they will think that I have done—that."

He rushed wildly to the window, but there was no escape there. There was a hideous drop that he dared not face. Then he saw the cupboard and he flew into it, closing the door behind him.

It seemed to be full of spiders' webs—they clung about his face and his hands and were thick about his hair, but he knelt there with his back against the wall, watching for the door to open.

It opened slowly, and into the light of the moon they stepped softly, their dark cloaks trailing behind them and the shadow of their black hats hiding their faces. "I knew who it would be," thought Mr. Bannister. He sank down in a heap on the floor of the cupboard and his teeth chattered in his head. He knew that there was no escape.

They did not seem to notice the body that swayed to and fro from the bed-post. They stepped slowly across the room, flung back the door of the cupboard and dragged out Mr. Bannister.

He fell in a heap at their feet. "I didn't do it," he cried. "I didn't, really. You know I didn't—I never saw him before to-night. I had only asked

him for a bed and some bread and cheese. I have come from London. I have missed my train. I was going to Little Dutton."

They dragged him across the floor, one on each side of him, and in a moment the room seemed to be full of people. They poured in through the door and stood in an excited crowd round him, and they all talked at the same time.

They wore, for the most part, large white cotton nightcaps, and many of them held little brass candlesticks with little candles burning brightly—the flames guttered a little in the breeze from the open window.

"I told you so—I knew he'd done it—he must die at once—in the middle of the night, too."

But he could only cry helplessly: "I didn't do it, I tell you. I was going to Little Dutton and night came on so quickly—" but he couldn't get any further because he couldn't remember what came next.

And then the door opened and the crowd made way respectfully. It was the woman of the train. She came toward him smiling grimly, and he knew that his doom was sealed.

"You tell them!" he cried, crawling toward her. "You know that I was in the train. I was in the same carriage. Tell them I didn't do it—you know I couldn't!"

But she smiled grimly and motioned with her hand. Someone brought forward a rope, and in a moment it was about his neck.

"No—no—not that!" he cried. "I am a journalist. It is murder!" But they raised him in their arms, and he knew that they were going to hang him from the bedpost by the side of the little landlord. The nightcaps closed round him; the candles flickered in the breeze; the woman watched him with quiet eyes.

"This is Little Dutton," she said

to him, and she touched him on the arm. "I hope you will forgive my waking you, sir, but this is Little Dutton, and you would have passed it."

He thanked her as he rubbed his eyes. She was sitting soberly opposite him, the basket on her knees, and the little boy watched him silently from the corner.

"Oh, thank you." He gathered his gloves and his stick. "I have been sleeping, I am afraid—thank you very much."

As he stepped out onto the platform he looked at his watch. It was a quarter to one—lunch-time; and he was very hungry.

And so it was a dream. He was conscious of a feeling of intense regret. The wind passed howling down the platform; the porter frowned at him as he gave up his ticket—the main street of Little Dutton stretched drearily in front of him.

For a moment he had touched Romance. For a moment he had been the center of a crowd—he had lived. Now he was back again—a journalist in quest of a sordid murder case.

He wrapped his shabby coat around him and sighed. Was it, after all, a dream? Perhaps for a moment he had wakened—for a moment he had been Bannister the Romantic—Bannister the center of life and death.

He turned into a shabby restaurant and ordered a chop. Opposite him there sat a commercial traveler, a little run to seed.

"Cold," said Mr. Bannister.

"Very," said the traveler—and then added as he watched the dust whirl past the window:

"It's a dull world."

"Not so dull," said Mr. Bannister, and he winked as one who has been through a great experience. "I could tell you things . . ." he said—and he laughed.

